

Grief and Loss

Understanding Grief

Grief is a normal and natural response to ANY kind of loss. Such losses could include experiences such as:

- the death of a person;
- the ending of a relationship;
- a miscarriage or termination of a pregnancy;
- the divorce of your parents;
- having been a victim of crime;
- the death of a pet

Grief is a very personal experience and so there is no right or wrong way of grieving. Grief is not just one feeling – rather it can encompass a variety of emotions which might take time to work through and resolve. The process of grieving can therefore not be hurried, and each individual can be expected to respond to losses in their own unique way.

Possible reactions

Although the process of grieving is personal and unique there are some common emotional reactions which people experience at this time. Some of these include:

- numbness – immediately following the loss some people experience a numbing sense of disbelief. This might last for a few hours, days or even weeks. The numbness is as a result of the emotional shock of the loss and the sense of unreality is your body's way of protecting you in those early days.
- disbelief or denial – a refusal to accept someone's death is very common in the early days following the loss. This disbelief or denial is possibly another way that we protect ourselves from being overwhelmed by our emotions.
- anger – this is a natural reaction to any loss. The anger often is a response to the perception of injustice and powerlessness which might accompany a loss. A grieving person may feel angry at the person responsible for the loss; at God; at life in general for the injustice of the loss or even at the dead person for having died.
- anxiety – feeling overwhelmed, confused, fearful, unable to cope or even believing that there is something wrong with yourself are all possible symptoms of anxiety which might leave the grieving person feeling vulnerable and unsafe.
- guilt - thoughts of what if or if only can sometimes preoccupy a grieving person. These thoughts are sometimes a useful way of making sense of the loss, but they could also result in unrealistic feelings of regret, guilt or self-blame.

Things that could help you

Grief can be a messy, exhausting and overwhelming experience but it is survivable. As human beings we possess within ourselves infinite resources to cope with and move beyond grief but we need to start by allowing ourselves time to express the pain first. These are some suggestions of things that might help:

- *Talking* – it is helpful to talk to family and friends about what are you feeling. You may find that you need to repeat the events of what happened as a way to try to make sense of the loss. You may find that you want to speak to someone who is objective and not connected to you in anyway. In this case it helps to find a counsellor who will be able to offer you support during this time.
- *Avoid isolation* – grief can be very isolating and can often leave you feeling very lonely. You need to find ways to counter this sense of isolation. This could include joining a support group, writing about your experiences in a journal or on a blog, getting information on grief and loss by reading relevant books or articles, getting out and spending time with friends.

- *Exercise* – we grieve in our bodies as well as our hearts and minds. Sometimes exercise even just a gentle walk can go a long way to relieve some of the tension that builds up in our bodies.
- *Set your memory to work* – some people find it helpful to remember the person that has died in a tangible way. Some ideas include planting a tree, creating a memory box with photos and special objects that remind you of the person. You need to find meaningful ways to honour the memory of the person who has died.

There are no rules in grief. These guidelines are offered as suggestions, but you will need to find what works for you. You are your best guide – listen to yourself and do the things that are helpful for you.

When things go wrong

Sometimes grieving can get complicated. If you find yourself experiencing some of the following, then it is important that you seek help:

- Lack of interest in your academics and decreased academic performance.
- Risk taking behaviour such as drug and alcohol abuse and sexual experimentation.
- Decreased interest in activities that you previously enjoyed.
- Prolonged deterioration in relationships with family and friends.
- Signs of depression such as sleeping or eating difficulties; low energy levels; chronic feelings of sadness; thoughts of suicide.

Getting help

You do not have to go through this alone!

At UCT there are psychologists based at Student Wellness Services who will be very happy to speak with you about your experience of loss and to help you through the grieving process. Should you or any of your friends be struggling with loss / grief please contact us for a confidential counseling session.

Find us @:

Student Wellness Services

28 Rhodes Avenue

Mowbray

Telephone Numbers:

- **021 650 1017**
- **021 650 1020**

Hours:

Mon – Fri 08H30 – 16H30

- be informed**
 - know the dangers**
 - make an informed choice!!**